

**Local Redevelopment Authority
Meeting Report
March 7, 2007
2:00 p.m.
Berks County Services Center**

Attending: Commissioners J. Schwank, Chair; M. Scott; T. Gajewski; B. Dennis, County Manager; M. Kirshner, Assistant to Commissioner Scott; B. Gottschall, Dep. Coordinator EMA; C. Breneiser, Communications Center Director; K. Pick, Exec Dir County Community Development; D. Hess County Coroner; L. Kelleher, City Clerk representing Pres. of Council V. Spencer and City Managing Director L. Churchill; R. Weinoffer, representing Congressman Gerlach.

Call to Order

Ms. Schwank called the meeting to order at 2:12 p.m. She announced that Mr. Gontz, Mr. Metzger and the Navy BRAC Specialist were not able to attend the meeting today due to the winter storm. She stated that the Naval Operational Support units currently located in Reading will be moving to the Lehigh area. She also announced that the property the units currently located in the Naval Marine Center will be vacating the facility around 2011.

Purpose

Ms. Schwank stated that the purpose of this meeting is to have presentations and discuss the NOIs submitted by Mary's Shelter and BWIC and the County Communications Center.

Ms. Kelleher reported that she inquired about the City's interest in using this facility with the Police Chief and the Managing Director. The Police Chief and Managing Director said that they are interested in using part of the facility for the police academy, the bomb squad and/or the City Communications Center. Ms. Schwank stressed the need for the City to put their proposal in writing as quickly as possible.

Mary's Shelter/BWIC

Mary Kate Bernosky, Executive Director of BWIC; and Christine Folk, Executive Director of Mary's Shelter gave a power point presentation on the history of their organizations, their mission and their proposed use for the facility (hard copy distributed to these attending).

Mary's Shelter would move all operations to this site and BWIC would move only the shelter currently located at 9th and Muhlenberg Streets. BWIC plans to sell the center (composed of one multi-use property & one 3 unit apartment) existing at 9th and Muhlenberg but has not had an appraisal of the buildings worth. The Administrative Staff would remain at their Penn Street location. They stated that the cost to retro fit the building is estimated at \$1.1 million.

Mr. Gajewski expressed his reservations noting that the extensive rehabilitation and retrofitting may make any conversion cost prohibitive. He also noted the difficulties in assessing this facility as access is not readily available. Mr. Dennis agreed and added that the problem is further compounded as the facility will not be vacant until 2011.

Mr. Gajewski and Ms. Kelleher inquired if either organization will expect financial assistance from the City and County to develop this project. Ms. Bernosky and Ms. Folk replied that they have started fund-raising and have raised approximately \$100,000 to date. They stated that they were unsure if they would seek financial support from the City or County. Mr. Gajewski reminded them that the City and County have been asked to contribute to building projects for these agencies in the past. He also noted that the County and City provide an annual CDBG allocation to these organizations.

Ms. Schwank noted the need for the LRA to discover the highest and best use for this building.

When responding to an inquiry, Ms. Bernosky and Ms. Folk stated that they were unsure if the needs of homeless individuals were satisfied because none of the agencies serving this community perform any statistical tracking. They noted the current practice of all agencies working together to meet the needs of the homeless and other underserved individuals. Ms. Bernosky stated that people seeking help from these agencies are referred to other support agencies if their own location is at capacity. They again stated that they do not track how many of those referred find assistance elsewhere.

Ms. Bernosky added that in the case of BWIC, clients are generally not homeless but come from "precarious" housing. Ms. Folk also noted that many of Mary's Shelter clients are not truly homeless but are challenged due to being pregnant. She added that Mary's Shelter would like to put up some permanent housing that could provide long term use for some clients.

Mr. Scott noted that the goal of homeless programs and other social service agencies is to provide its clients with the necessary education and skills that will enable them to provide for themselves and their families. He questioned the use of programs that sustain a person's dependence on social service programs. He expressed his displeasure with the growth of the social service industry that promotes subsidized living rather than independence.

In response to a question on the ability of the current agencies to provide for the homeless, Ms. Bernosky replied that BWIC clients are only homeless temporarily due to domestic violence. She stated that in January approximately 450 persons in Berks County were served by homeless programs; 37% of those are women and children.

Ms. Schwank noted that the BRAC regulations do not require an LRA to address those in substandard or precarious housing. Mr. Scott agreed and read the definition of "homeless" from BRAC regulations which states "homeless assistance transfers are not available for general relief of the poor or for those who are temporarily dislocated due to disaster. Only those organizations that propose to serve homeless personas meeting the McKinney-Vento Act definition are eligible to receive a no cost transfer." Under the McKinney-Vento Act a homeless person is defined as "An individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide living accommodations."

Mr. Gottshall inquired if Ms. Bernosky and Ms. Folk would agree to use the existing building for their program if the parcel was subdivided and the LRA used the undeveloped parcel for another purpose. They stated that they were unsure.

Mr. Scott reminded the group of a report prepared by former Commissioner Reiver showing that approximately 700 non-County residents per year apply for social services within the borders of Berks County.

Mr. Dennis gave a brief presentation on the County's NOI. Mr. Hess, Mr. Gottshall and Mr. Breneiser described the problems and security issues caused by the current location of the Coroner's Office and the Berks Emergency Management Agency. They described their lengthy search for a new location that will best serve the needs of Berks County residents.

The City was again reminded of the need to submit their proposal in writing.

Mr. Scott replied that the Coroner's Office and Berks Emergency Management Agency may need to move to a location that will serve their short term needs as they address the long term goals of their respective operations.

The group discussed the difficulty in assessing the best use for this property. Mr. Gottshall noted the need for the LRA to determine the highest and best use for the property and the need for the LRA members to make decisions that will best serve the community as a whole. Mr. Hess noted the ability of the LRA to apply for a grant that will provide the LRA with assistance in assessing the best use for the property.

Mr. Scott moved, seconded by Mr. Gottshall, that the LRA should apply for a grant that will enable the LRA to hire a consultant to assist with the necessary analysis and assessment of the Naval Marine Center and property, assist in the review of the NOIs submitted, prepare a Facilities Analysis and Community Needs Analysis, and advise the LRA on the general recommended upgrades and other challenges relating to transitioning the property from military to civilian or public use. The motion was approved unanimously.

The LRA Meeting was adjourned by general consent at approximately 4:00 p.m.

*Respectfully submitted by
Linda A. Kelleher, City Clerk*